justice to the fullness of their circumstances and experiences. Battered women who kill their abusive partner in “nonconfrontational” situations (during a lull in the violence or while the abuser was asleep) have posed special challenges for advocates.5

Framing the Narrative Broadly in Women’s Self-Defense Work

Advocates for battered women challenge the restrictions on narrative inscribed in traditional criminal law in two crucial respects. First, advocates press traditional criminal law to depart from its dominant tendency to focus narrowly on the criminal incident.6 Specifically, women’s self-defense work urges traditional criminal law to broaden its time frame to take account of earlier events leading up to the criminal incident, such as the abuser’s history of threats and physical abuse, the escalation in violence over time, and the woman’s efforts to reduce her and her children’s exposure to further violence. Moreover, women’s self-defense work presses criminal law doctrine to consider the situational obstacles to a woman leaving a battering relationship, such as economic necessity; the frequent inability of police, restraining orders, and even shelters to protect battered women; and the high incidence of separation assault in which efforts to leave trigger more severe or lethal reactions by abusers.7

Second, activists for battered women stress the importance of assessing the woman’s decisions and actions from the perspective of someone in her position. It urges that the battered woman’s conduct be judged against an individualized standard of reasonableness in which the jurors ask themselves whether an ordinary person “in the shoes of the defendant” could have reacted as she did. The so-called objective test of reasonableness,